

## THE ARTS IN BLACK.

It is 5:30 p.m. on a snowy January night in the Jamaica, Queens section of New York. Eight year old Princess Stewart, a dance student at the Imani Dance Hall of Hollis, practices her leg lifts while waiting to be picked up by her mother. “Her father and I have always had an interest in her [Princess] learning other forms of art besides just hip-hop,” says Monica Stewart, the mother of Princess about what inspired her to enroll her child in an after school ballet program. “There are not many African American children who can say that they were exposed to much else outside of the world of Lil’ Wayne. I wanted to give my child that opportunity,” Mrs. Stewart continues.

Is this statement true? In the year of 2010 with the first African American president, and the first woman of Puerto Rican descent to be appointed as a Supreme Court Justice, it can’t be true? Or can it?

It is true that when it comes to the broader areas of the art world, areas like popular music and dance, to name a few, African Americans have not only been able to keep up, but have stood alone as the trend setters and forerunners of these particular esteems. But it has been within the narrower, more specialized areas of these genres, where black artists have had to struggle. In areas such as classical music, classical dance and the visual arts world, to name a few, African Americans have had a difficult time not only receiving the same type of exposure within their own communities, but gaining the same type of recognition, success and notoriety as their Caucasian peers have. While doing research for this article, I’ll never forget how shocked I was to find how many people- black or white, within the art world or not- were familiar with Andy Warhol and his work, but were not familiar with Yinka Shonibare or Kerry James Marshall, even though Nigerian artist Shonibare is the subject of a huge exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

Although this is unacceptable, the problem according to many experts is not an issue of race, but that “serious contemporary art (and other forms of art) are too difficult and esoteric to have broad appeal in any larger community of Americans”, says artist Glenn Ligon when asked his opinion on this issue. It is known, for example, that only a small percentage, of any group, is interested in classical music. Whether it is racism or not, blacks have had a hard time in the world of finer arts.

Or have they?

It is duely noted the struggles that African – Americans have had to face in all areas, because of race, and especially in the art world. What is not noted, however, are the strides that, **lately**, Africans – Americans have made despite the obstacles? “Blacks have gone from the margin to the center”, a statement by Leslie King- Hammond, the founding

director of the New Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. What research shows us is that in areas of art, such as visual art, classical music, classical dance, etc. - areas where blacks have been considered to be on the outskirts of, blacks have, in fact, maneuvered their way to being just as recognized, accepted and successful as their Caucasian counterparts.

When attempting to reach a discussion about black art, it is only appropriate to take a journey into its roots. Its roots, or course, beginning in Africa.

## **BEFORE SLAVERY-**

Just as evidence of the first Homo sapiens sapiens, the Australopithecines (the members of the hominid family to which we belong) can be found in Africa, so too can evidence of the first visual artistic artifacts be found in Africa. The origins of African visual art lie long before recorded history. Before slavery, a form of carving called African Rock art can be found in the Sahara about 6000 years ago, long before the coming of the Portuguese and European slave trades, rock art or rock paintings as they were called, were used to depict human figures, animals and/or a combination of both. African rock art is still used in Africa today and has grown so vastly that it can be identified according to what region of the African continent it is from.

Similar to the African rock art is another form of sculpturing or carving used in Africa before slavery called, African Lost Wax casting. Lost Wax Casting is a process in which casters melt bronze, cooper or brass materials to in these sculptures. Among the most well known of works produced by this casting process was a series of metal heads. Considered one of the finest works created from this series is a seated male figure named after the village in which it was found called the, Tada Figure.



*The Seated Tada Figure:  
Example of Lost Wax Casting in Africa.*

The Tada Figure is believed to have been sculpted in the late thirteenth- early fourteenth century. The naturalistic proportions of its head are among one of the elements that set this sculpture apart.

Found in Western Africa before slavery and still being used today are an African form of traditional art called, wooded masks. Made in the image of either a human, animal or mythical creature, wooded masks are worn by the dancers of the community to celebrate an impending marriage or engagement, crop harvest, men preparing for war and many other events taking place in the community. The masks can be worn in one of three ways: vertically, covering the face (as a helmet); encasing the entire head; and as a crest resting upon the head. When worn as a crest, the mask was commonly covered by some sort of disguise. African wooden masks are not only used to commemorate a special event, but they also often represent a spirit. Before the mask ceremony, the chosen dancer goes into a deep form of meditation where he is supposed to communicate with his ancestors. It is also believed, that once on the dancer wearing the mask, the spirit of the mask controls the dancer. Most African masks are commonly decorated with things like ivory, animal hair, plant fibers, pigments, stones, and semi- precious gems.



*Examples of African Wooden Masks.*

## DANCING:

Before slavery, dancing in Africa played a very vital role in not only huge celebrations, but in everyday life. Like the wooded masks of Western Africa, dance was used to celebrate special occasions and rites of passages like births, marriages, the men going off to war, etc. It was also used to emulate everyday events such as planting and/ or the harvesting of crops.

## SINGING:

Singing in Africa, before slavery, was also used to commemorate certain events. In a very high-pitched tone, a young woman could be found singing about the fact that she is soon to meet her husband and how nervous and excited she is feeling. Unlike dancing, songs were made and sung by everyday villagers, expressing their everyday hopes, fears, and anticipations of what was happening in their lives on a daily and not so daily basis, with ordinary and special occasions. Just like art in all societies and cultures, African art was used to express the values and attitudes of its culture in that period of time.

## LITERATURE:

Pre- colonial literature art in Africa took on a plethora of more meanings than the arts of dance, singing and visual arts. In addition to a written form of literature, Africans also used a type of oral literature that involved tales of mythological or historical characters. This was a type of storytelling that often entailed a call- and –response technique used by the storyteller. One popular form of traditional African folk tale storytelling is the “trickster” story, where a small animal uses its wits to survive dangerous and unfortunate encounters with larger creatures. Some examples of these animal tricksters are in ‘Anensi, a spider in the folklore of the Ashanti people of Ghana; “Ijapa” a tortoise in the Yoruba Folklore of Nigeria, and Sungura; a rabbit found in central and East Africa. The point of the African oral literature was to expose a lesson that could be taught to its listener.

There are, of course, more examples of written literature in pre-colonial Africa. African works of written literature were just as prolific as oral literature. With the exception of Swahili written literature, which drew inspiration from Islamic teachings and lessons, the majority of pre-colonial African written literature covered an array of topics such as astronomy, poetry, law, history, politics and philosophy, among others. Examples of pre-colonial written literature in Africa are abundant with an estimated more than 300,000 old manuscripts tucked away in various libraries and private collections all over the world.

Although artistic expressions like dance, singing and African oral literature changed dramatically with the introduction of the European and Portuguese slave trade, some forms of African art were able to remain in tact. In fact, artifacts like the wooded

masks and African rock art, then and now, are credited as being huge inspirations for many twentieth century artists. Because African visual art was known for paying special attention to the human form in terms of proportions, artists like Picasso, Matisse, Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Modigliani and others, began an interest in the abstraction and organization of the human form that can be seen in their art. African visual art is also the influence for many European architectural structures. European architectural pioneers such as Antonio Sant' Elia, Le Corbusier, Pier Luigi Nervi, Theo Van Doesburg and Erich Mendelsohn, who were also all painters and sculptors, all used a similar type of architecture and art that gave reference to proportions and geometric patterns.

## **SLAVERY-**

The state of black art had changed significantly with the introduction of the slave trade. When blacks were brought to this country and some other parts of Europe, Portugal and parts of the West Indies, they more often than not were forced, by their slave owners, to abandon most of the cultural practices that were celebrated on the continent. Practices such as religion, traditional dance and song, and others were all forgotten about with 'the coming of the white man'.

Black visual art had now found a new direction to accompany the new land that most of these artists found themselves.

## **VISUAL ARTS:**

At a time when both the American slave trade and, America itself were in its infant stages (roughly during the periods of about 1654- 1865, the recorded beginning and ending of American slavery), what one could describe as African American visual art was represented by artists like Patrick Reason (New York), William Simpson (New York), Robert Douglass (Philadelphia), and brothers Daniel and Eugene Warburg (New Orleans and Paris), to name a few who were mostly painters. With a few exceptions, these artists often created work that, despite an occasional portrayal of black subjects, were, for the most part, created in a European fashion with mostly Caucasian subjects. New England based artists Scipio Moorhead, although an engraver and not a painter, was also known for depicting subjects and topics that were not representative of his race. However one of the most popular examples of this style of painting and artwork from this period was done by artist Joshua Johnson (1763-1832).

A portrait painter from Baltimore, Joshua Johnson is a very important figure for not only this type of artwork, but because he became the first African-American to make an actual living from his artwork. Johnson created a plethora of popular works, but the work that he became most noted for was a family portrait entitled, The Westwood Children. The Westwood Children was a portrait of the male children of Margaret and John Westwood, a very successful manufacturer in Baltimore at the time. The portrait became so popular because of the still like facial expressions exhibited by the children.



*Portrait of Tanner's The West Wood Children.*

Today The Westwood Children family portrait can be found in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

In addition to the artistic contributions made by Johnson, Moorhead and Reason, African- American visual art could also be described in the form of a small drum, several wrought iron figures, dozens of ceramic vessels and a few examples of small domestic architecture. These were found among enslaved black communities in different parts of the Southern United States, and later brought to national acclaim and notoriety. These items were recognized because not only did they stand as an artistic window into the lives of black people and what they were doing, but because the structure of these items could be easily compared to similar items found in certain regions of West and Central Africa. These items offered an insight into the cultural and psychological state of blacks in America, at the time. The suggestion was: although physically removed from their homes in Africa, the average African-American still has very close ties to the African spirit and culture.

#### SINGING:

A new form of singing called slave spirituals and work calls were now used for musical expression. Slaves used a series of calls they made to each other in the fields while working, called work calls. The most popular form of song used by slaves, of course, old slave or old Negro spirituals. Negro or slave spirituals were also sung by slaves during work in the field, but unlike work calls, spirituals were sung to express the feelings of hopelessness and down trodden felt by the slaves.

#### DANCING:

The expression of dance also changed a lot when blacks were brought to this country. More than singing or perhaps any other tradition taken from the continent,

blacks that were brought here tried to keep in touch with their dancing roots. It was, of course, banned. Because the definition of dancing in Africa was to lift your feet, black slaves had to adapt by using shuffling movements with their feet, while waving their arms and moving their torsos and hips. These dances were given names like the 'ring shout' or 'ring dance', the calenda, the chica, or the jubs.

Although forms of expression such as dance and song shifted with the introduction to the America's, one musical instrument that did not change and was in fact brought over from Africa by black slaves was the use of the banjo drum.

The banjo is a drum that was created and used in Africa. Made of mostly wood and sheepskin, the banjo was used in Africa to help celebrate certain events, ceremonies and traditions. Strangely enough, this instrument was one of the traditions that were not lost and were carried over to the Americas when Africans were brought here. The banjo drum would become a very important part of black American society and the American musical culture for many years to come.

Along with song and dance, the process of writing also changed when blacks were brought from Africa to the Americas. No longer was the practice of oral literature allowed, and because it was against the law for blacks to read, African-Americans making contributions in any type of written form was almost absolute except for in a few examples. Phyllis Wheatley was one of these few examples.

Phyllis Wheatley was not only the first African-American woman to have her writings published, but the first African-American poet. Although noted as the first African-American poet, Wheatley was ironically not born in America; she was born in the Gambia, Senegal section of Africa in about 1753 (it is not known the exact year that she was actually born). Kidnapped at about the age of eight by slave catchers in 1761, Wheatley was shipped on a boat to Boston. In Boston, she was purchased by a John Wheatley and his wife, Mary. The ship on which she traveled was called the Phyllis. This is how she obtained her name.



*Portrait of poet Phyllis Wheatley.*

Black slaves were usually not allowed to read. If and when a slave was caught trying to read, it was sometimes punishable by death depending on where you were in the country. Rules such as these were the most strictly enforced in the South. The North, however, was another issue. Although the north had slaves just like the south did, northern cities were known for being a bit more lenient and laid back when dealing with slaves and blacks as a whole.

It is understandable, then, that Wheatley, after being purchased by her slave masters was taught to read by them as well. John Wheatley and his wife, Mary, tutored the young girl in English, science, geography, Latin and history and encouraged her to pursue her writing. So much so that she was left with a pen and paper on her night stand in case she would get inspired. By age 12, Wheatley was not only fully literate, but could read and understand Greek and Latin literature. At the age of about 20, Wheatley traveled to London with another member of the Wheatley family named Nathaniel. Here a collection of her poetry was published. She also recited her poems with an audience that included the Lord Mayor of London and was also scheduled to recite one of her poems to George III, but she traveled back to the states before she was able to meet the engagement. On October 18, 1773, as a result of her popularity and influence, Wheatley was given 'honorary' freedom by the people of London and America although she did not gain legal freedom until 1778 when her owner, John Wheatley, passed away. In 1775, Wheatley published a poem celebrating President George Washington. The poem was entitled "To His Excellency General Washington," and in 1776 Wheatley was invited to the White House as a thank you gesture for the poem.

Phyllis Wheatley was married and gave birth to a daughter, Eliza, three months after her slave owner, John Wheatley, died. Despite her major successes, Wheatley ran into financial trouble when her husband, John Peters, was imprisoned for debt in 1784. Wheatley was forced to take care of her daughter by working as a scullery maid and died not long after in 1784.

Phyllis Wheatley poems were so popular for many reasons, but mainly because of the topics of religion, classicism and sun worship that they explored. Her poems were a contemplative and reflective look into her own life and value systems. She used these elements of religion, classicism and the sun as representatives of her own personal relationships. Phyllis' success, therefore, comes from not just the fact that she was an African- American, but because she was able to find a writing style and topic that was unique to her own personal style and truth. To see the talent in artists like Wheatley, Johnson and Moorhead, reluctantly made white America see that perhaps black Americans had a purpose for things other than slave labor. This new revelation, however, would not be enough. The artistic world, just like America itself, was new and although there were pockets of success stories like Wheatley and Johnson, it would take a while for the African-American to receive the same recognition and notoriety, on a broader scale, that their Caucasian competitors were.



## CIVIL WAR, RECONSTRUCTION AND POST- RECONSTRUCTION YEARS-

In 1861, the Northern United States declared war against the Southern United States over many issues of the future of the nation and how it was going to be run. The issue of slavery was a huge contributing factor in this debate. The north had grown into a technologically advanced place to live and do business run by mills and machinery. The South's wealth, upkeep, and complete way of daily living was dependent on one thing—slave labor. Blacks imported from Africa had made the South a very wealthy place and many knew that without access to slave labor, the south would not survive.

### VISUAL ARTS:

It was probably because of this environment, the end of slavery and the inevitable decline of the South, that an influx of African American artists began to emerge. In the visual arts world, African-American artists like Edmonia Lewis, Robert Scott Duncanson, and William Harper, to name a few, came to the surface with introspective, inspiring and sometime controversial messages about race, culture and other things. This gave way to an usher of black artists who would need to use their art as a vocal platform for what they felt about society.

Joshua Johnson was the first African-American to make a living from his artwork during slavery. Edmonia Lewis (1845-1911) and Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) were the first African-Americans to gain international acclaim for their art works. Lewis was before slavery and Tanner was after slavery.



*Sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis.*

Of African, Haitian and Native American descent, Mary Edmonia Lewis was born on July 4, 1845 in Albany, New York. Both Lewis' mother and father died unexpectedly when Lewis was 8 and the 9 years old. After the death of her parents, Lewis was then raised by her aunt and older brother, Samuel, who encouraged her to attend Oberlin College, located on the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio. Oberlin College, at the time, was one of the first institutions of higher learning that was known for admitting both women and ethnic groups of all kinds. It was at Oberlin College where Lewis discovered and began to nurture her artistic abilities with respect to art. Lewis' father was of Haitian and African descent while her mother was a Mississauga Ojibwe Native American and African mixture. Lewis' ethnic background would prove to be a very significant part of her life as it played a major role in her sculptures. Lewis created marble figures that were known for making powerful statements about the topics of race, sexism and the plight of the Native American.

After graduating college and during about the middle of the Civil War in 1863, Lewis moved to Boston to study and work under a known fellow artist and sculptor in Boston by the name of Edward Augustus Brackett. Under his guidance, Lewis was able to craft her own sculpturing tools and sell her first sculpture. It was a sculpture of a woman's head that sold for \$8.00.

After traveling, studying and working all over the world on her art career, Lewis' popularity and respect as an artist became most evident in 1877 when former U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant commissioned her to do his personal portrait. Lewis would continue to work in marble sculptures, but in the 1880's, with the introduction of neo-classical art, the marble sculptures that made Lewis famous became less and less in demand and so did Lewis' popularity.

Although a very wealthy woman, it is believed by many that the decline of interest in her work left Lewis very depressed because she dropped out of the art scene by the late 1800's. Very little is known about what type of work she did or how she lived in her later years. It is not even known the actual year in which she died. Her death was recorded in 1909, but there were many reports of seeing her alive in Rome, as late as 1911. The actual location of her grave is even unknown.

What is known is the impact that Lewis had as an African-American artist of her time and even today. In 2002, scholar Molefi Ashanti listed Lewis on his 100 Greatest African-Americans. Lewis sculptures and the issues she explored through her work inspires many artists today.

After the Civil War, Henry Ossawa Tanner would emerge as the second African-American painter to receive international notoriety for his work. Born on June 21, 1859, Henry Ossawa Tanner attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 1879. Like Lewis, it was at a university where Tanner nurtured and perfected his art. Unlike Lewis who mostly did marble sculptures, Tanner was known for his style of painting. After years of traveling, studying, and teaching art in places like Paris and the Middle East, Tanner returned to the United States in 1893 to create his most famous work, The Banjo Lesson.

*Painter Henry Ossawa Tanner.*



*Ossawa's The Banjo Lesson.*

The Banjo Lesson is a painting of an elderly African-American man teaching what is believed to be his grandson how to play a banjo. The Banjo Lesson is considered to be one of the most profound works of art for this time period by any artists, including black. Although simplistic in its formation, this painting explores very deep messages and themes.

For a long time, blacks have been known and stereotyped as the entertainers of society. Other artists of this time such as Thomas Worth, Willy Miller, Walter M. Dunk, Eastman Johnson had all used the image of an African-American playing the banjo, but in a more comical way. It was a way that gave an undertone of buffoonery in respect to African-Americans and entertaining. Tanner works against this stereotype by reproducing the same image in a serious, more humanistic way, giving an image of real people,

experiencing real things and having real feelings, as opposed to stereotypes of people and what they are feeling. He was able to create these images not only with the characters in the painting and what they were doing, but with the use of colors and lighting in the painting as well.

Tanner was mostly seen as a realist painter and artist, focusing on more accurate depictions of people and subjects. Tanner was also known for his use of very different brush strokes and uses of color.

During his later years and life, Tanner worked for the Red Cross Public Information Department. He died on May 25, 1937.

Although they were able to find professional success in their lives because of their hard work in art, hard work was still not able to protect them from the setbacks and problems created for them by their skin color.

With an admittedly timid personality, lack of acceptance of his work because of his race proved to be very painful to artist Henry Ossawa Tanner. The pressures of American racism and the burden of representing his race properly may have been too great for Tanner. He permanently relocated to Paris, France in 1891 where he chose to stay until his death in 1937. Another very popular African-American visual artist of this time was artist Edward Mitchell Bannister (1828- January 9, 1901). Edward Mitchell Bannister was an African-American realist painter from Boston who at the height of his career, in 1876, was so successful that he was nominated for and won a Bronze medal for art at the Galleries of the United States Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, but when he arrived to receive his award on the day of the ceremony, he was not let into the building.

Perhaps the most disturbing example of the issue of race affecting its artist at this time was for previously discussed artist, Edmonia Lewis referred to as the 'Oberlin College incident'.

Only a few months after the beginning of the Civil War in 1862, when Lewis was attending Oberlin College, she and two of her school mates, Maria Miles and Christina Ennes, were spending time in Lewis' dormitory room. They had planned on going sleigh riding later on that day. Later on that evening, Mile and Ennes became very ill. The ladies were taken to the hospital and soon after recovered, but because the doctors concluded that there had to be some kind of poison in the girls system, and because Lewis herself did not get ill, it was thought that the ladies were poisoned by Lewis in her room. When Lewis was not arrested for the incident, the townspeople decided to take matters into their own hands. Walking home alone from school one night, Lewis was ambushed by a group of both male and female assailants. Lewis was dragged into an open field, badly beaten and left for dead by the gang. Her attackers were never found or prosecuted.

Other notable African-American visual artists of this time were landscape painter, Robert Scott Duncanson (1821- December 21, 1872), landscape painter William Harper (1873-1910), and seamstress Harriet Powers (October 29, 1837 – January 1, 1910), between the years of 1865 to about 1900. This was the period of Reconstruction and although the African-American population in America was supposed to have been set free, the day to day struggles African-Americans had to face on many different levels,

would suggest quite the reverse. Perhaps the overt racism, oppression and white on black violence that blacks were the victims of during this time caused a sort of psychological withdrawal from African-American artists. Cincinnati, Ohio painter Robert Scott Duncanson created dreamy, more pastoral scenes that captured the serene views of the Hudson River. Artist William Harper and previously discussed painter Edward Mitchell Bannister both created moody, Barbizon like school scenes. Although all African-American, these artists seemed to be interested in creating art work that was completely detached from the social and political environment created by racism at the time. Not only did these artists seem to create images that were bereft of any type of social messages on a racial front, but they seemed to be lacking of any social messages, of any kind, anywhere. This left most historians to believe that the racial atmosphere provoked by whites at this time caused many blacks, whether consciously or unconsciously, to not only look away from these situations that made them afraid and uncomfortable, but to embrace a another type of reality all together.

Another form of what later became considered as art that originated from this time period was the creation of bible quilts. A bible quilt was a quilt made with an appliqué technique (a technique where a smaller ornament or device is sewn onto a larger surfer) used to record religious, astronomical and other events or stories. At one time scholars believed that slaves sometimes utilized quilt blocks to alert other slaves about escape plans during the time of the Underground Railroad. Harriet Powers was the woman responsible for the creation of the Bible quilts. Powers, a seamstress born into slavery in rural Georgia, was not an artist and was oblivious to the world of art galleries and exhibitions. It is ironic then that she is known today as one of the greatest artist of the twentieth century. Her bible quilts were used to create a story and although many other types of bible quilts were created throughout the northern and southern United States, they are the quilts made by Powers that got the most recognition for having started this technique. The bible quilts created by Powers are still in good condition and can be found in some of the greatest art galleries around the world.

### DANCING:

After slavery, the dances that came from the plantation such as the ring shout, the calenda and the juba began to show up onstage in what was known as minstrel shows. This was the first time that African –American dance culture was seen by whites in large numbers. The minstrel shows were a kind of play performed onstage throughout America and London. Instead of shining a positive light to the dancing that was created in the African American community during slavery, these minstrel shows were mostly used as a way to make fun of and degrade the black population. Both black and white actors performed in the minstrel shows. Although being a black performer who was participating in a minstrel show usually meant that you were making fun of yourself and your race, it was more often than not, the only type of work that a black performing artist could get at the time. Other dances that became popular at the time were a dance called

the “Cakewalk”. In 1891, The Creole Show, a revue staged on Broadway, introduced this dance. It was the first dance created by blacks to become popular with the white population.



*Examples of the dance: The Cakewalk.*

### SINGING:

The state of music and singing in the African American community still took on the form of the old Negro spirituals, even after slavery. Blacks continued to sing songs about oppression and feeling down trodden, only now they took on other forms.

In the post reconstruction days, a musical style known as ragtime became very popular from about 1897-1918. Ragtime was created solely by African Americans. The abolition of slavery led to new types of opportunities for blacks in America. Strict segregation laws prohibited most blacks from regular employment opportunities, but they were, however, able to find work in various entertainment fields. African-Americans could find employment as entertainers in dances, minstrel shows and vaudeville. Many black pianists were found during this time period playing in bars, clubs, and brothels to earn a living. This is where ragtime or ragged time music began. It began in the red-light districts of American cities such as St. Louis and New Orleans. Ragtime can be summoned up as sheet music for a piano. This music was originated by black bands that would be found playing in these huge nightclubs and bars. Ragtime can be noted as one of the few original American art forms. Before a ragtime song was ever published, it was popular for years on the St. Louis and New Orleans streets. By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it had spread all over North America.

Ragtime was first introduced to the public as sheet music that was popularized by African-American entertainer, Ernest Hogan. Hogan had two ragtime hit songs that came out in 1895. Two years later Vess Ossman recorded a medley of these songs as a solo “Ragtime Medley”. In 1897, a Caucasian composer by the name of William H. Krell published his song entitled, “Mississippi Rag”. Tom Purkin became another African-American ragtime musician that was first to have his works published with his ragtime hit, “Harlem Rag”. Of all the ragtime musicians and composers, white or black, the artist that made the most impact on this style of music was African-American, classically trained pianist, Scott Joplin.

Scott Joplin (July 1867 / January 1868- April 1, 1917) was an African American composer and pianist born near Texarkana, TX to the first post slavery generation.

Joplin's parents were an ex-slave from North Carolina, Giles Joplin; and a free born Kentuckian woman, Florence Givins. Joplin was the second of six children. The confusion about his actual birth date comes from the fact that many African Americans of the time, even after slavery, were denied an official birth certificate.

The Joplin's moved to Texas a few years after Scott was born and it was here that Joplin was given a musical education by his family, learned to play the piano, and was allowed to practice in a neighbor's house and at the home of an attorney by the age of seven. By the age of 11, Joplin's talent was noticed by a German immigrant music teacher, Julius Weiss, who chose to give him lessons for free even teaching him classical music as well as folk and opera.

Throughout his teenage years, Joplin performed at various local events where a pianist was needed such as weddings, birthdays, etc. The adult Joplin would find that a profession as a traveling musician did not offer steady or often work except for in brothel. This is where and how Joplin supported himself. The regions in which these brothels resided were called red-light districts and it was here where he introduced his pre-ragtime tunes to the public.

By 1897, ragtime had become a national craze in American cities, and was described by the Dispatch News as "a veritable call of the wild, which mightily stirred the pulses of city bred people". By this time, Joplin had made his way to the World Fair in Chicago and had formed his own band. Joplin would create one of his earliest works in 1896 called "The Great Crush Coalition March" a song that he wrote and composed about a staged train crash in Melennon County, TX.

In 1899, the same year that he married his first wife Belle, he wrote, composed and sold what would become his most popular piece to date, "The Maple Leaf Rag". He sold this song to the John Stark & Son music publishing company. The Maple Leaf Rag was an immediate national success and was not just a ground breaking hit for an African American musician, but it was ground breaking for both ragtime and America as well. It was ragtime's first big hit and was the first great instrumental music hit in America, selling over 75,000 copies in roughly six months. "The Maple Leaf Rag" also served as a model for hundreds of rag songs that came after it. In addition to the enormous hit with "Maple Leaf Rag", Joplin wrote numerous other popular songs like his "Original Rags", written and released a year before "Maple Leaf Rag", in 1898. Other popular songs like "The Entertainer", combining syncopation, banjo configurations and sometimes call-and-response which led to the ragtime idiom being taken up by classical composers such as Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky. Throughout his career, Joplin wrote 44 original ragtime pieces, a ragtime ballet, and two operas. During the height of his popularity Joplin was dubbed the 'King of Ragtime'.



*Portrait of Ragtime artist: Scott Joplin.*

Scott Joplin's popularity declined with the introduction of jazz and the decline of ragtime music. By the mid 1920's – 1930's, most musical fans were no longer familiar with Joplin or his music, and certainly were not listening to it. It changed that quickly. His impact, however, on African American culture, American culture and America as a whole were undeniable. "He composed music unlike any ever before written," according to biographer Edward Berlin. "The piano playing public clamored for his music; newspapers and magazines proclaimed his genius; musicians examined his scores with open admiration." Joplin was not only able to break new ground as an African American artist, but he was able to break ground for American music as a whole. A black artists who was able to put America on the map and, consequently, be accepted into some of the mainstream components of American society, gave a collective sense of hope to the African American. Perhaps their skin color did not matter. Perhaps they could make it on the merits of their work and talent alone.

Joplin and his music were re-discovered in the 1970's with the Academy Award winning movie, The Sting, starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford. Many of Joplin's songs such as "The Entertainer" were used for the soundtrack. In 1976, more than 50 years after his death, Joplin was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his works and achievements in music.

### THEATRE:

For a long time in America, the casting of black roles in the theatre was not prevalent. One of the reasons for this (in addition to plain, old fashioned racism) was because all dramatic entertainment at the time was of English origin, with mostly English characters and plots, therefore not having a need for black performers. For many years, the only notable exception of a black character in an American theatre production was in the case of Shakespeare's "Othello". "Othello" was played all over America and Europe



at the height of its popularity, but even the main character of Othello, who was a black Moore, was played by a white actor. This was a practice that would continue for a long time. Up until the 1960's- in theatre and film, in America and Europe- minorities were always played by people who did not represent them. These imposters were made to look alike with clothes and make-up. Many of the very popular John Wayne westerns of the 1940's and 1950's had Native American characters that were played by Caucasian actors made to look like Native Americans. Sometimes the efforts to change a Caucasian actor into a Native American character were so futile, that a viewer could easily tell the difference. In England, as a rule, the female character in a Shakespearean play had to be played by a man. Yes, an actual man!

Other than Othello which had been popular since about the 1400's and 1500's, the first play that introduced a prominent black character in American and European production was Thomas Southern's, Oroonoko. Oroonoko was the real story of an African prince who was sold into slavery. It had a brief but huge success during the time it debuted. In 1769, the John Street Theatre presented the American premiere of Isaac Bickerstaffe and Charles Dibding's comedy opera The Padlock. The Padlock introduced another African American character with an important role in the play. The Padlock introduced the character of 'Mungo'. 'Mungo', an illiterate, lazy, shiftless, African American male figure, who complained constantly about the shameful and down trodden plight of being black, first appeared in The Padlock. The character of Mungo would be a standard for black characters for years to come.

In 1770, the character of 'Ralpho' in The Candidates offered another glimpse into another of the first African Americans to be depicted in American drama.

As time went on, with the abolition of slavery and the migration of more free blacks moving through the South, more and more frequent and positive images of African Americans would emerge. This, however, would prove to be a struggle. For many years to come, characters like 'Mungo' would be a repeated standard in terms of the way that blacks were depicted on stage, and then in film. Black characters there for the purpose of being made fun of was the staple for a long time in American and European theatre. Although these characters were there to create comic relief, it was comic relief at someone else's expense.

In the beginning, the depiction of African Americans on stage only took form in certain stereotypes, depending on the characters gender.

#### FOR MEN:

1. The big, tall, extremely dark- skinned, illiterate buffoon. Very physically strong but mentally dim- witted.
2. The very sharp, very intelligent (usually handsome) corrupt, criminal. Very capable mentally, but dishonest.

#### FOR WOMEN:

1. The younger, physically appealing, voluptuous, overly sexual, vixen type.
2. The older, physically un-appealing (usually heavy set) nurturing, homely Mammy type.

These are the categories that blacks fell into when they were represented on stage, and then in film. There was usually no in between. Perhaps the most dominant example, however, of negative images by blacks being shown in a negative way are the examples of the blackface and minstrel shows.

The minstrel shows, as discussed earlier, were a type of shortened play practiced in America and in parts of Europe, especially in England. One of the many features that were sometimes presented in a minstrel play was the Blackface character.

Blackface is theatrical make up that was used to depict African Americans. A Caucasian performer would use black shoe polish, greasepaint or a used burnt cork on their face and very bright red lipstick on their lips. At times this look would be accompanied by a woolly wig, a tailcoat, gloves and raggedy clothes to complete the look. The goal was to make fun of the black person in creating a character that exploited some of the stereo typical images of blacks as being lazy and stupid. The first blackface performers were always white.

Blackface became one of the dominant forms of performance tradition in American theatre and stayed that way for roughly 100 years. It also very quickly spread into the overseas theatre productions, especially in England, where the tradition lasted longer than it did in the states, occurring on primetime television as late as 1978 and 1981. No one knows the actual point in time in which blackface came onto the scene. Some date it all the way back to the year of about 1441 when captive West Africans were captured and then displayed in Portugal. Black face characters were then portrayed in the Elizabethian and Jacobean theatres by whites. However, the first documented example of performances in blackface was on May 29, 1769 with the introduction of the character of Mungo in the play The Padlock. The character of 'Mungo' was played completely in blackface. The play attracted notice and hundreds of other performers adopted the style. By 1810, Blackface was so popular that there were Blackface clowns that performed and were hired at events like birthdays throughout the United States. It was another Caucasian comic in the United States, however, that truly made blackface a staple on the stage.

Comic actor, Thomas D. Rice introduced the song "Jump Jim Crow" with his stage act in 1828. By 1832 it had received international acclaim and so did blackface. In the early 1830's and 1840's, blackface performances mixed song and dance in their skits. In the beginning, Blackface performers were only able to secure jobs in relatively unknown venues. As time went on and the blackface popularity grew, more reputable venues were able to be booked. Blackface performers performed solo, or in a duo or as a trio. The first Blackface characters were always male. When women characters came onto the scene, white men dressed in drag to represent them.

The stereotypes created in the Blackface minstrel plays were vital in cementing some of the racist images for blacks and other ethnic groups in entertainment. In fact, the

term Jim Crow originates directly from comic actor Thomas D. Rice's traveling and performing under his stage name of 'Daddy Jim Crow'.

By the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century, changing attitudes about race, racism and the concern over the way that blacks were being represented in mainstream culture caused an end to Blackface. It ceased to be used in performance in the U.S. and other places as well.

## **HARLEM RENAISSANCE-**

With the start of Reconstruction (the so-called rebuilding of the South) blacks had made unprecedented growth in a number of fields in the south. By the end of Reconstruction, laws were put in place by whites to discontinue the progress made by blacks, virtually creating a whole new type of slavery for blacks in the South. The repression and strict laws created by whites made the South a very un-desirable place to be. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> century, blacks were moving in huge numbers to the North. Northern cities like Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and New York were all being inhabited by huge numbers of the black population. The black populations of the South came in three groups. The first group came with the end of Reconstruction and the placement of the new Jim Crow laws. Another group came during the middle of WWII. A final group came with the demand for un-skilled industrial labor available after WWII.

The Harlem Renaissance (originally called the New Negro Movement) is thought to have spanned throughout the years of 1919- 1930. Approximately the end of WWII and the beginning of the stock market crash and Great Depression. The Harlem Renaissance can be defined as the period, within these years, when an explosion of black intellectual, artistic, and cultural life was found in Black communities throughout America. Contributions from blacks during this era were made in many ways throughout the country, but the heart of the New Negro Movement was in the New York region known as Harlem.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the district of Harlem had been built exclusively for white upper and middle class. If you are someone who knows about real estate, the apartments and brownstones built in Harlem, still to this day, are among the best built architectural structures in America. Because of the enormous wave of immigrants coming from Italy, Ireland and other places in Europe, the once exclusive district became abandoned by its white residents and became a predominantly black community. In 1910, a large block along 135<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue was bought by various African American realtors and a church group.

By the turn of the century, the African American community had established a large middle class in Harlem and in the other northern areas where blacks had recently become a part of. The African American culture of the South was now in the North, creating a huge market for African American dance, music, literature, etc. At the same time, whites were becoming increasingly fascinated by the black cultural movement found in places like Harlem and wanted to emulate it. A number of white artists and

business men began to offer African Americans access to mainstream publishers, art venues, etc., for their work.

Although it is not specifically known the exact event that was the catapult of the Harlem Renaissance, many sources seem to think it was the premiere and run of the theatre production called Three Plays for A Negro Theatre. Three Plays for a Negro Theatre premiered in 1917. Although written by a Caucasian playwright, Ridgely Terrence, Three Plays for a Negro Theatre was an all black production that conveyed complex human emotions and feelings from its black characters. The message of the play was that we [society] were rejecting the stereotypes put forth by the blackface and minstrel shows of the past. James Weldon Johnson called the premiere of this play, “The most important single event in the entire history of the Negro in American Theatre”.

Other historians believe that the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance came in the year of 1919 (the end of WWI) with the publication of “If We Must Die,” by Claude Mckay. “If We Must Die,” was a revolutionary poem written by Mckay that spoke, in a defiant tone, against the race riots and lynchings that took place throughout the nation, especially in the South. Although Mckay only alluded to an actual group or race of people being spoken to, many African American readers considered this poem to be a battle cry for a demand for a new system to be put in place.

The cultural phenomenon known as the Harlem Renaissance was not just restricted to Harlem and the United States. Strangely enough, the Harlem Renaissance spread overseas in Europe to places like Munich, Germany and Paris, France, especially. After WWI, many thought that things would change for the African American in America. Even with the Harlem Renaissance, the chokehold of American racism was so virulent that it caused African Americans to look for an escape- this time overseas. Europe had always been a place known for less restrictive laws and regulations, especially when it came to race. Black expatriates of WWI recall being especially well received when they had to do tours in certain places overseas, and how their skin color had no barring on the manner in which they were treated. When they came back home to America, however, it was not the same. Black soldiers, who had given their service and fought for this nation, upon coming home, were denied housing, jobs and were still not allowed in certain hotels and eateries around the country. When black troops came home, they had to deal with race riots and violent disruptions created by whites who were afraid to compete with black troops for jobs and housing, now that they were home. This caused the Red Summer of 1919, where a race riot ensued over the same issues.

These factors contributed to many black expatriates and artists to moving overseas, to Paris, France. Many places in Europe were known for being more hospitable to blacks than America was, but it was especially in Paris where African Americans in this period were able to find a home away from America. Paris became just as fascinated with the Harlem Renaissance as America. Most places in Europe were known for being accepting of that which was exotic, especially in Paris. Unlike America, African Americans were welcome with open arms in Paris. Graften Tyler Brown, Nelson A. Primus, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Charlie Parker, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin were all African American

artists who chose to make a permanent home in Paris at this time. Later on in the 1950's and 60's a new wave of African American artists had discovered Paris and decided to move. These artists included Nina Simone, Harvey Cropper, Herbert Gentry, Arthur Hardie, Clifford Jackson, Sam Middleton, Earl Miller, Norman Morgan, Larry Potter, Mildred Thompson, and Walter Williams. Paris had become so well known for its acceptance of blacks that at one point there was an actual section in Paris called, 'little Harlem', where African Americans of all professions had found a new home. Entertainer Josephine Baker can be considered as a representative of the droves of blacks who were finding acceptance in Paris for this period.

Josephine Baker was an African American singer, dancer and entertainer. She was the first African American to star in a major motion picture, to integrate an American concert hall and to become an internationally known entertainer and performer.



*Entertainer/ performer Josephine Baker.*

Baker, also known as the 'Creole Goddess', the 'Bronze Venus', the 'Black Pearl', and 'La Baker', was born on June 3, 1906 in St Louis , MS. From a life of poverty and abuse as a child, she developed as a street dancer and by the age of 15, was recruited for the Chorus Vaudeville show in St. Louis. Baker was eventually billed as the highest paid chorus girl in Vaudeville after a move to New York where she would perform at such popular clubs like the Plantation Club, and then in Broadway plays like the Shuffle Along and The Chocolate Dandies. Baker's popularity came from dancing as the last dancer in the chorus line, a position that garnered a dancer a great deal of attention.

Baker's success in New York took her to Paris where her complete stage persona changed. Now dancing almost completely nude, she opened at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees on October 2, 1925. Her erotic gestures and half nude form made her an instant hit in Paris, whose performance standards were less restrictive than in America. After touring the whole of Europe for a brief stint, she returned to France to perform and star at the Folies Bergeres. The performance at the Follies Bergeres would prove to be vital,

setting the standard for her future performances and shows. At the Follies Bergeres she performed a dance called the Danse Sauvage where she wore nothing but a costume consisting of a skirt made of fake bananas. Baker was known for her very extravagant performances and shows which consisted of feathers, sequins and once and a while, her pet Cheetah, Chiquita, who would get loose on stage at times.

Although Baker performed almost completely nude, her performances were not seen as crude or vulgar. They were, in fact, seen as artistic and exotic expressions. Ernest Hemingway dubbed her as “the most sensational woman anyone ever saw”. Baker became a muse for contemporary authors, painters, designers, and sculptures like Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Pablo Picasso and Christian Dior. At the height of her popularity, Baker became a European film star appearing in movies like Siren of the Tropics, Zou Zou, and Princesse Tam Tam, all silent films that never made their way to America, but became huge successes in Europe.

Baker’s career took a huge turn when she met business manager and lover, Giuseppe Pepito Abatino- and Italian stone mason passing himself off as a count. Abatino encouraged Baker to change her whole performance and stage persona. One of the things Baker was known for was singing, but for not necessarily having a great singing voice. With a vocal coach, she changed her voice from a lighter, more mousy, tone and pitch, to a deeper, more commanding instrument able to capture more wide spread attention. In the words of Shirley Bassey, “she went from a ‘petite danseuse sauvage’ with a decent voice to ‘la grande diva magnifique’. I swear in all my life I have never seen, and probably will never see again such a spectacular singer and performer”. In 1934, she took the lead in a revival of Jacques Offenbach’s 1875 opera, La Creole as the Theatre Marigny en the Champs- Elysses of Paris.

Despite her international success, Baker was never able to achieve the same recognition and notoriety in her home country- America. Most say that it was obviously because of racism, but others insist that it was due to the fact that an entertainer of Josephine Baker’s type, black or white, who performed exotically and almost nude, was not something that America was ready for. When Baker returned to America in 1935 to perform in a starring role on Broadway’s The Zielgfeld Follies, her performances received very bad reviews and her part was soon replaced by Broadway actress Gypsy Rosa Lee.



*Josephine Baker in her infamous Banana costume.*

Toward the end of her career Baker volunteered as an intelligence smuggler for the underground resistance in Portugal where she would hide coded messages in her sheet music. She then worked as a spy for France during WWII and was awarded the Croix de Guerre, the Rosette de la Resistance and was made a Chevalier of the Legion D'honneur by General Charles de Gaulle. Baker's popularity was so huge that even when the Nazis' invaded and occupied France, they were reluctant to go into her house to question her about her involvement as a spy.

Baker was a testament and a pillar to art. Baker's success came in the period of the Harlem Renaissance and was responsible for the interest in ethnic forms of art and in the term, 'Art Deco' as her success coincided with the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs.

Josephine Baker died on April 12, 1975 at the age of 68. Her funeral was held at the L'Eglise De La Madeleine and she was the first American woman to receive an 'Honorary' French funeral. A practice usually reserved for French political officials in France.

### THEATRE:

African- Americans in theatre also flourished at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. During the early – mid 1800's with the popularity of the blackface and minstrel shows, pockets of abolitionist's society began to look for rebuts of this imaging and stereotyping. The first of this type of protest was Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 dramatization of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Uncle Tom's Cabin was an American play that spoke against the imagery of slavery, blackface and the stereotypical black buffoonery, supporting an argument for freedom and real equality for not just the American slave, but the person in America. For many years, Uncle Tom's Cabin was the most successful play in America. Uncle Tom's Cabin was the most overt example of this type of message at this time. As the years went on, messages of a similar nature would pop up periodically, but never in this bold manner.

It was not until the 1920's in the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance that black theatre, of all kinds, truly began to make its mark. The first was Eugene O'Neill's 1920 production of The Emperor Jones which used African American actor Charles Gilpin as the character title role, creating the first important African American figure in an original American drama. O'Neill began his career by employing black characters in his one-act plays. After The Emperor Jones, O'Neill wrote All God's Chillun's Got Wings, an unusual and introspective study of an interracial marriage. The sudden interest in African American culture brought on by the Harlem Renaissance may have been the cause for many Caucasian playwrights to invest their talents in black productions. Black theatre productions enabled audiences to see the most talented black actors of the time such as Charles Giplin, Paul Robeson, and Rose McClendon. They were able to see these performers in prominent roles, as opposed to the stereotypical blackface roles that most audiences were used to. Other important black plays of the era, all written by whites were, In Abraham's Bosom (1926), Porgy (1927), and musicals like Deep River (1926), Show Boats (1927), and Gread Day (1929). These were all plays about the black condition in America and even though the leading female character in the musical 'Showboat' was played by a white woman, all plays stood together as the new way in which African Americans were being viewed.

#### VISUAL ARTS:

By the beginning of the 1900's and the Harlem Renaissance, the state of black visual art had seen a shift in its depictions with artist like painter Edwin A. Harleston, sculptor Isaac Scott Hathaway and sculptor May Howard Jackson who dedicated much of their work to portraying affluent African Americans. Sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller created work that explored cultural themes such as an African past and a black cultural rebirth. Although these artists emerged during the first two decades of the 1900's, the topics explored in their work proved to be more relevant in years to come.

The mood felt in the social and political atmosphere known as the Harlem Renaissance created a rooster of African American painters that were seemingly more reticent to talk about black issues, black people and themes that were more uplifting to black culture. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, African American artists such as painter Edwin A. Harleston and sculptors Isaac Scott Hathaway and May Howard Jackson all dedicated much of their work and careers to creating images of distinguished, affluent, and notable African Americans.

Sculptor Meta Warrick Fuller explored themes discussing going back to an African past and a black cultural rebirth. These issues would prove to be an important part of African American dialogue even in years to come and would keep Fuller as one of the most talked about African American artists of this period. In addition to these visual artists, it was a journal entitled "The Voice of the Negro" that stood out in giving new meaning to black cultural consciousness at the time. In the pages of "The Voice of the



Negro”, artist John Henry Adams, Jr. creates dozens of portraits of African Americans, from all different walks of life. These images of African Americans were created to be a backdrop to the emerging racial consciousness of the time.

Other African American painters of this era like Palmer C. Hayden, Malvin Gray Johnson and Laura Wheeler Waring played a vital role in creating depictions of the ‘New Negro’ by using bold, stylized portraits of African Americans as well as scenes of black life. African American sculptor such as Richmond Barthe, Sargent Johnson and Augusta Savage used clay, wood and bronze to create similar representations of black life.

### DANCE:

Music has always played a vital role in African American culture. The music and dance crazes created in the Harlem Renaissance were no different. At this time period, African American dance moved into the clubs. Nightspots like the Cotton Club and the Savoy were the center of dance crazes like the Swing, the Lindy Hop and the Charleston.

### MUSIC:

Dances such as these were accompanied by a new musical soundtrack created in the Harlem Renaissance known as The Blues and Jazz. The Blues and Jazz were two very important musical genres created during this period, but they are two of the only original American musical art forms. Because both are black musical art forms, they are interconnected. Jazz originated from the Blues. The Blues originated from the South. The tradition of the old Negro spiritual that spoke about the depressed and down trodden, were carried on into the music that would become the Blues.

### LITERATURE:

The genre of African American literature stretches all the way back to previously discussed 18<sup>th</sup> century writer, Phyllis Wheatley. Similar to the literature that was practiced before slavery, African American literature after slavery had a tendency to incorporate within it oral forms of expressions. These forms have been evident in spiritual sermons, gospel music, and rap. Like other art forms, the issues explored in African American literature have been issues that related to where African Americans were in the larger realms of society. African Americans and the issues of culture, racism, slavery and equality have all been popular themes in the literature of African Americans.

Today African American authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Walter Mosley are ranked as some of the highest paid and well respected authors, black or white. The topics discussed in African-American literature have changed and evolved along with the state of where African Americans were in society at the time. Before the Civil War, African American literature primarily focused on the issue of slavery with the “Slave Narratives” that were published at the time. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century authors

W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington debated on the correct methods in which to confront the issue of American racism.

The Harlem Renaissance, along with all other things black, was a time when African American literature reached a special peak with writers like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Wright. With everything else that the Harlem Renaissance encompassed, the period is probably best known for its literature. Langston Hughes is one of the most respected writers of this era. Hughes received most of his recognition as a poet. He first received recognition in 1922 for his collection of poems called The Book of American Negro Poetry. In 1926 he published another collection of poems called The Weary Blues and a 1930 novel, Not Without Laughter. Hughes most famous poem is “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”. Another famous writer of this period was novelist Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston received her greatest recognition for her classic novel Their Eyes Were Watching God in 1937. Their Eyes Were Watching God was an exciting depiction of a woman searching for love and fulfillment in the 1920’s South. Hurston ended up writing 14 books, ranging from anthropology to novels to short stories.

Other writers, although not as famous, who came out of the Harlem Renaissance were Jean Toomer, who wrote a stirring collection of poems, stories and sketches about rural black life. Dorothy West, wrote the novel, The Living is Easy about the lives of upper class black families. Another popular renaissance writer is Countee Cullen, who described everyday life for a black person in his poems.

## **THE GREAT DEPRESSION, AND THE WORLD WAR II YEARS-**

Approximately 10 years after the stock market crash that caused the American tragedy known as the Great Depression, WWII started. After WWI, many thought that racism would change for the African American in this country. It did change. Social movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and Jazz were major landmarks for African Americans in the way they were seen in American and therefore treated. It was still, however, not enough.

When WWII broke out (September 1, 1939- September 2, 1945), African Americans played a significant role. More than half a million served in Europe. Despite the numbers and participation, however, they faced discrimination. For the beginning of the war, blacks were not allowed in combat and were mostly placed in units where manual work was needed. Black regiments were made into baseball teams and sanitation crews for the military. When they finally were allowed into combat, they were not allowed in units with white soldiers and were usually not allowed on the front lines. In 1941, pressure from civil rights groups such as the NAACP convinced the government to set up all black combat units. These combat units were initially created as experiments, designed to see if black soldiers could learn on “the same level” as white soldiers could.

### **VISUAL ARTISTS:**

Around this time, various debates arose among artists and intellectuals in the African American community around creating art that was not just racially representative, but socially responsible and created a 'folk identity'. Visual artists such as Aaron Douglas responded with mural paintings for schools, libraries and YMCA's, which exemplified this shift. So did the colorful paintings of Archibald J. Motley, Jr. Many visual artists during the Harlem Renaissance were funded by the philanthropic organization, The Harmon Foundation. During the time of WWII, black visual artists could find funding and support under the Federal Arts Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). African American visual artists like Allan Rohan Crite, Ernest Crichton, and Dox Thrash were all successful proteges of the Federal Arts Project (FAP). These artists created works in which poverty, racial discrimination and a growing social consciousness took center stage.

An increased interest in visual arts, black or white, was created in the time of the Harlem Renaissance and continued throughout the WWII years. Even artists who had not been classically trained or attended art school were given notoriety and a chance to make it on the visual arts scene. Among these artists was African American stone carver, William Edmonson. Born and raised in Tennessee, Edmonson's unsophisticated style of art was honored with a one person exhibition in New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1937. He was the first African American artist to receive that distinction. Other really successful visual artists from the African American community at this time were Horace Pippin. Pippin was an intuitive artist who received notoriety through his paintings about the lives of Abraham Lincoln and John Brown. Other African American painters like William H. Johnson, Charles Sebree, and Eldzier Cortor achieved a measure of success in the larger world of art as well, often fusing the style preferences of the day which were color abstraction, figural expressionism, and surrealism.

### THEATRE:

In 1921 the African American singing team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake wrote the musical Shuffle Along, creating a re-interest in black musicals. Although they were a change from the blackface minstrels of the 1800's, Shuffle Along and other productions like it still incorporated some of the stereotypical images that blacks had fought against. By the time of WWII, however, things had changed a little and African Americans were able to enjoy more prominent roles onstage.

African Americans began to star on Broadway in either all black productions or when they played in specialty numbers (when their songs, dances and performances were separated from the rest of the white cast, not really having a role in the actual production). Ethel Waters was a huge African American singer/dancer at the time. Her first performances on Broadway were in all white productions where her performances were separated from the rest of the show. It was not until 1940 with the all black

production of Cabin in the Sky that Waters had an actual role and was an actual part of a plotted musical.

If Ethel Waters was the African American song and dance woman of the period, than Bill Robinson was the African American song and dance man of the period. One of the most famous performers of the period, black or white, Bill Robinson was relegated to all black 'Blackbird' revues and later to a parody play called 'The Hot Mikado' in 1939.

WWII helped to create greater interest in the plight of the African American. The dramas continued to be written largely by whites and tended to be protest plays. One such play was Deep are the Roots (1945). Another popular theatrical attraction was Anna Lucasta (1944) written by a Caucasian about Caucasians, but was played by an all black cast when no producer wanted to produce it because of its ideals about the black race. During the 1940's, several producers attempted to cast blacks in roles that did not specifically call for them, such as the policeman in Detective Story (1948). Broadway musicals such as Finian's Rainbow (1947) and South Pacific (1949), dealt with racial prejudice. Kurt Weill's Lost in the Stars was based on Alan Paton's novel Cry the Beloved Country, about blacks and apartheid in South Africa. More significant, however, were the contributions of Harold Arlen. Arlen was a Caucasian songwriter who wrote several musicals featuring all black casts. Arlen created productions about black life and used such popular actors like Lena Horne, Pearl Bailey, Jaunita Hall, and Diahann Carroll.

As African American theatre musicals became more popular, so did an awareness of opera, classical music and dance in the African American community. Although it has been hard, because of racism, for blacks to be received and appreciated in many areas in American art, music has always been an art form where blacks have been able to stand alone as the forerunners and innovators. Musical genre jazz, the blues, hip hop, and gospel, all found their roots in the African American community. What people don't know is that when it comes to musical genre that are not so main stream, such as classical music, dance and opera, blacks have also made impressive headway, within the past 40 years, although it has not been easy.

Tyneisha Hill, a 23 year old classically trained Soprano singer and a member of The Boys and Girls Choir of Harlem since the age of 15, would probably agree with this statement. "*I enjoy singing and being a part of classical music more than other types of music,*" Tyneisha said when asked about her attitude towards African Americans singing classical music versus music that is more traditionally known as being African American-like gospel for example.

*"I enjoy gospel music definitely because I grew up in the church. I love the power of a gospel song, but I would rather listen to them than sing them,"* the Bronx native continues to say. As a member of one of the most popular African American classical singing groups, Tyneisha feels that an infusion of other types of art forms, such as classical in our everyday life, would help to break the misconception that many people seem to have about the African American community not having the chance to get as much exposure as other ethnic groups do when it comes to other types of art forms.

*“Classical music is something that you have to be able to relate to after time. You have to be able to find some sort of relevance. We adapt to what we can relate, but it’s mostly what I am around in my everyday life. When we tour and do performances, people come with an expectation of us doing just gospel and are presently surprised when we sing classical music. People appreciate us,” she adds, “and although African Americans tend to be more excited and more expressive audience members, we are well received by all ethnicities where ever we go. People come back stage and tell us how we have touched them with our singing.”*

Savoir Faire: Do you feel a certain level of responsibility, being an African American group who performs classical music, to represent a certain image when you go out and perform.

*Hill: Absolutely. Every time we go out to sing, we are responsible for portraying a certain image of class and professionalism. As African Americans people look at us as- what are we going to do. We represent Harlem. We represent a large group of young Americans. We are responsible for setting a precedent and keeping it there, setting a standard. She goes on to say that “Dr. Turnbull (Walter Turnbull, the founder of the Boys and Girls Choir of Harlem who passed away about 2-3 years ago) was Dad. Since Dr. Turnbull has passed away it has been very hard keeping it together. It’s all about having a leader who is passionate about it. When Dr. Turnbull was in charge of the choir, we were taught elegance at sixteen. Now we understand more because we are adults, but Dr. Turnbull made sure that he instilled a sense of responsibility and professionalism in all of his students”.*

In addition to the Boys and Girls Choir, Dr. Walter Turnbull also created a school for the Harlem community. This school was called the Choir Academy.



*THE BOYS AND GIRLS CHOIR OF HARLEM*

The Choir Academy worked as a regular school, with a focus on classical music for its students. *“It was a regular school,”* Tyneisha reflects *“they offer all of activities that a regular school would offer. They did home activity classes too.”*

Opera and other forms of classical music has long been a scarce issue in the African American community until recently.

In the 40’s and 50’s African American classical singers such as Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson stood alone as two of the most popular classical singers representing the black race at the time. Stage productions such as Porgy and Bess and Aida found success with all black cast members while giving operatic performances in their plays. Still examples of classical music being represented by blacks, were few and far between for that period and when they did exist, were very rarely respected by their white peers. When considered for singing in the White House for First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Marian Anderson was told that she wouldn’t be welcome to sing because of her skin color. Marian Anderson was eventually allowed to sing for the cabinet when First Lady Roosevelt cancelled her membership.

Today classical music in the African American community can be said to be just as widely represented by black singers as white ones. Currently about 20 Black American women are recognized throughout the world as being among the finest, most popular and most respected classical singers of today. Among them are Grace Bumbry, Shirley Verrett, Jessy Norman, Harolyn Blackwell, Kathleen Battle, Barbara Hendricks, Leona Mitchell, Clamma Dale, Isola Jones and Florence Quiver, to name a few. Today African Americans can celebrate more than 50 years of operatic stage roles in the United States and internationally.

Not only are blacks being accepted in genres like opera/classical music, but many feel that as African Americans, we have something different to offer.

-Tyrone Aiken, a bass operatic singer from the Harlem Opera Theatre, located in Harlem, New York, would agree.

-Aiken- *“We are better when it comes to singing period, but especially in opera. We are able to offer a richer, deeper tone as African Americans when singing that cannot be offered by someone from another ethnic group. There is an earthiness that we have to our voices because we are black,”* he goes on to say. *“We (black people) are the epidemy of music. No one can do it like us.”*

A professional operatic singer since 1985, who once performed in a 1993 Houston revival of Porgy and Bess, feels that not only can classical music be done the best by African Americans, but that other forms of artistic expression such as opera are essential is assisting with the development for the youth in the African American community.

Aiken- *“If I could talk to a young African American child who was interested in opera, I would tell him/ her to stay in school. It is important that you have an academic background. You should be a good student and want to excel. I think the introduction of opera to our youths would help a great deal with some of the negative influences that they have to face. Opera needs to be introduced in every school. The kids need to write an actual opera. We don’t need to write more operas about Madame Butterfly. What we have to do is create operas that are based on things people are familiar with. A woman who is trying to get her son out of the street: there can be an opera written about that. Maybe the internet can be involved in some way. This would do something for the young black person,”* he finishes. *“We need to feel so good about ourselves. Opera does that.”*

Aiken plans to teach musical theatre to kids. He feels it will provide, *“a readiness, a confidence level that we need as young black people.”*



*The Harlem Opera Theatre.*

The Harlem Opera Theatre has about 30 shows per year performing opera for their audiences and can be found touring all over the country.

#### LITERATURE:

It was during WWII when African Americans literature would reach a special level of notoriety with the introduction of a Tennessee born African American writer by the name of James Baldwin.

Noted for his raw and vivid explorations of race and sexuality, Baldwin wrote novels, plays, poems and essays that brought to the forefront these issues before they began to be improved in society.

Born on August 2, 1924, Baldwin's mother Emma Bardis Joynes moved to Harlem, New York when Baldwin was just an infant. In New York, Emma would meet David Baldwin, James adopted father. Although David and James had a very tumultuous relationship, the family stayed together for years. James may have gotten his first literary bug at the DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx where he was allowed to work on the school magazine. From the age of 14-17, Baldwin went through a religious stage where he joined the Pentecostal Church and became an actual Pentecostal preacher. When this religious stint was over, at the age of 17, he moved to the Greenwich Village area of Manhattan. It was here that he studied at the New School and began to write short stories, essays, and book reviews. Like many African American artists of the time, Baldwin became disgusted with the racism and limited opportunities that were afforded to blacks and consequently, made his second home in Paris, France. In France, his works began to be published in the literary anthology *Zero*, which had published essays by Richard Wright prior.





*Author, James Baldwin.*

In addition to being an African American, Baldwin was also a homo-sexual, living in a time where confessions of homo sexuality were against the norm, especially with black artists. One of the things that Baldwin was known for was homo-sexual eroticism in his work and especially in his second novel, Giovanni's Room, published in 1956. Baldwin was also known for shying away from the prototypical African American experiences in his work such as racism and equality. In addition to homosexuality, Giovanni's room also revolved around all white characters. Baldwin's first novel were works that contained black, white, hetero sexual, homo- sexual, bi-sexual themes and characters as well as the themes of the 1960's all rolled into one. These books came in the form of Another Country and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone.

Baldwin was also known for his essays and short fictional stories. A collection of the work he did when he traveled to France was printed in a 1955 book, Notes of a Native Son. Baldwin also wrote a long essay called, "Down at the Cross" also called the "Fire Next Time" which depicted the social and political unrest of the 1960's. The essay was published in issues of The New Yorker and landed Baldwin on the cover of Time Magazine in 1963. Baldwin's next essay, "No Name in the Street" discussed his own experiences and feelings on racism in the context of the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Medgar Evers, all personal friends of Baldwin.

In addition to his writings, Baldwin was also a huge civil rights activist who marched on the front lines with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and gave money to many civil rights groups. Although he was sometimes criticized for his homo-sexual life style by black groups and fellow artists (particularly Eldridge Cleaver who criticized Baldwin in his book, Soul on Ice) Baldwin found activism rewarding and would go on with his plight in activism until the end of his life.

During Baldwin's later life he returned to France. He concluded his career with the works of two novels, If Beale Street Could Talk and Just Above My Head. Both were insights into the importance of black families. He published a book of poems as well as another book length essay called "The Evidence of Things Not Seen" an insight into the Atlanta Child murders of the 1980's.

James Baldwin died on November 30, 1987 of stomach cancer. Throughout his career, Baldwin was inspired by Richard Wright and became the inspiration for many other artists such as Nina Simone, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and even photo journalist, Kevin Brown.

## **ABSTRACTION AND REALISM DURING THE POSTWAR YEARS-**

### VISUAL ARTS:

The Federal Arts Project (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), was an organization created for the purpose of helping artists realize their dreams, particularly artists in the African American community. Upon the final years of the Federal Arts Project (FAP) several painters were able to reach national prominence and success. The most successful in this group from the FAP was painter Jacob Lawrence.

Jacob Lawrence was a Harlem, New York native who reached prominence and success while still in his twenties. He described his art in two ways: “Dynamic Cubism” and as “the shapes and colors of Harlem”. Using topics such as Harlem, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Touissant Louverture Haitian revolution, and the African American migration to the North from the South; Lawrence was able to become one of the most relevant visual artists not only of his time, but of the twentieth century.

Born on September 7, 1917, Lawrence was thirteen when he moved to the region of Harlem with his mother, sister and brother from Atlantic City, New Jersey. It was here, in Harlem, where Lawrence’s mother enrolled him in an arts and crafts settlement house in an effort to keep him out of trouble. Although the only work that Lawrence came up with were pictures of his mother’s carpet, done with crayons. Lawrence dropped out of high school at age 16 and attended classes at the Harlem Art Workshop, taught by Charles Alston. Lawrence was very lucky to have been able to hone his skills and crafts in what was the latter part of the Harlem Renaissance. It was there in Harlem where he met and was taught by sculptor Augusta Savage at the Harlem Community Arts Center and artists Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn at the Alston- Bannarn workshop.



*Artist Jacob Lawrence and wife Gwendolyn Knight.*

The same year that Lawrence married fellow artist Gwendolyn Knight in 1941, he produced his Migration series, a sixty panel set of narrative paintings exploring the migration of many African Americans from the South to the North. This series called The Great Migration came out when Lawrence was only 23 and made him a national success. Lawrence would be known throughout his career for depicting the history and the struggles of African Americans. When the artist was 21 he created a series of paintings about the Haitian general Toussaint L'Ouverture which was shown in an exhibit at the Baltimore Museum of Art. This work was followed by a series of paintings about Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and abolitionist John Brown. His Migration of the Negro series was shown in New York. In the 1940's, Lawrence was given his first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. After this, he did a five painting series on the Westward journey of African American pioneer George Washington Bush. These paintings are now in the collection of the state of Washington History Museum.

Lawrence became the most eminent African American painter in the country during his time and continued to work until the end of his life. In 1997, he illustrated an adaptation of Aesop's Fables for the University of Washington Press. This was three years before his death on June 9, 2000.

During post WWII years, other visual artists like Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, and Beauford Delaney seemed to straddle a fence of giving their audience racially and socially conscious art and art that was more main stream. The Civil Rights Movement was evolving, and artists were in search of a different definition of what was described as modern Negro art.

At a time when abstract art was considered the status quo, several African American visual artists, among them Hughie Lee-Smith and Charles White achieved broad recognition. Lee-Smith created urban landscapes inhabited by people of different ages, sexes and races. White created a series of ink drawings of African American figures. Although White had been painting since the 1930's, these crayon figures of African

Americans were created in the 1950's. The work White created in the 1950's made him especially famous when it was framed by news reports of civil rights bus boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins and attacks on black protesters.

### DANCE:

Classical dance such as ballet, has taken the same form in the African American community that classical singing did: no one thought the form of classical dance would last or find a home in the African American community. Just like classical singing such as opera, however, classical dance in the African American community has not only found a home, but it has gone onto flourish just as much as its Caucasian competitors. It was especially in the postwar years, during the 40's to 50's when African Americans began to participate in other forms of dance besides mainstream such as, ballet and modern dance. Dancers and anthropologists Katherine Duncan and Pearl Primus studied dance in Africa and the Caribbean's and brought the moves they learned back to America. These techniques influenced many modern dance styles. Playing a contributing role in the development of modern dance were organizations such as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

Alvin Ailey, Jr., was the African American dance choreographer who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in New York City during the postwar years. The Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre has performed for an estimated 21 million people in 48 states in the U.S. as well as 71 countries on six continents. Among these performances include two South African residences.

### THE STATE OF BLACK ART:

The state of black art has changed significantly throughout the years. In spite of the struggles, blacks have begun to achieve acceptance, notoriety, success and recognition in areas of art that are not main stream, and are not seen as being prototypically black. Despite the progress, however, many feel that there are still milestones to be reached by blacks in art. Along with racism, which has strategically kept blacks out of these fields, the problem is, according to some, that blacks don't have the same type of exposure to these realms that whites do. Many feel that if more organizations like the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre were created, it would help tremendously to combat this problem.

Horace Turnbull, the director of the Boys and Girls Choir of Harlem is one who would agree with this stance. Horace Turnbull is the brother of Walter Turnbull, the founder of the Boys and Girls Choir of Harlem. Although not a singer or artistically trained, Horace took over the Boys and Girls Choir when brother, Walter, passed away about 2-3 years ago. Walter Turnbull had a musical/ singing background and founded the choir in 1968. The choir had been performing and touring for many years after its opening and received international success in 1989 when their voices were used for the

soundtrack of the movie Glory. Walter opened up a school called the Choir Academy targeted toward African American youths who were interested in music years after he opened up The Boys and Girls Choir.

Since the death of Walter Turnbull, the choir has understandably gone off track a bit with an impending sexual harassment case for one of its employees by its students. What hasn't gone off track, however, is the reputation of quality, talent, and excellence put forth by a classically trained black singing group.

We felt that Horace Turnbull's, brother of founder Walter Turnbull, opinion would be vital when discussing this issue.

Horace Turnbull seems to feel that the reason the Boys and Girls Choir worked so well because "*Walter made sure to include a sense of family*". If more organizations took on this responsibility, Horace feels, it would change a lot in the African American community in terms of their not only being an acceptance of these other art forms, but in terms of there being more of a feeling of growth in the community.

Horace reflects on his brother Walter and how he ran the organization. "*It was a very energetic organization. His (Walter) vision was to help children. The older ones were responsible for the younger ones. It was a process, a family mission.*" He goes on to say that, "*Walter was not just teaching singing to children, but he considered himself as developing productive human beings. He made sure the students went to college.*"

The Turnbull brothers originated from Mississippi. Walter noticed that singing helped him tremendously when growing up and not long after Walter made his move to New York, he opened up the Boys Choir of Harlem, later called the Boys and Girls Choir of Harlem.

The Boys and Girls Choir of Harlem have had and continue to have a very busy schedule. They've done tours and concerts all over the world and have performed for Barbara Bush in the White House. The criteria for being considered as a singer in the choir: an audition where the child must hit reasonable pitches.

Savoir Faire: I understand that the children have a responsibility level that was instilled in them by Walter Turnbull to be professional and to take their craft seriously. How do you feel about other organizations, especially African American organizations holding that same standard?

Turnbull (Horace): *Yes. I feel that any organization that works with African Americans should have the same level of excellence. Walter said nothing less than your best is acceptable. When Walter was alive, the older members became the father figures for the youth.*

Savoir Faire: What types of responses do you get from other people as an African American classical singing group? Do the responses vary according to what racial group you are performing for?

Turnbull (Horace): *Yes. It is different from blacks. With a black audience, a good number of the audience members are grandparents. There is, therefore, a sense of pride. They are seeing their own grandchildren, their nieces and nephews. It dispels all negative images or anticipating that the children may have.*

- *With Caucasian audiences: They are surprised. They marvel at “How can they do that”.*
- *When we travel abroad the response is much different: “We thought that all of you guys got killed and shot by the time you were 15.” Said an audience member backstage when we traveled to Israel.*

Savoir Faire: Being an African American singing group that performs and caters to classical music, do you feel that you have anything different or special to offer.

Turnbull (Horace): *Yes, we do. Because of our special tones, there’s no one who can do it better; if we apply ourselves.*

In addition to the issue of whether or not there needs to be more exposure in these artistic realms in black communities, in spite of the progress made by blacks, a larger issue seems to have come to the forefront of arts in the African American community. **The issue of negative images being perpetuated through certain art forms in the African American community.**

-Many feel that a building of more organizations like this in the African American community can also help in this area as well.

#### HARLEM OPERA THEATRE:



*Artistic Director: Gregory Hopkins.*

Gregory Hopkins founded the Harlem Opera Theatre about 15 years ago. As the founder of an all black opera company he feels that as African Americans we have to

“turn off the ignorance meter” and we have to be “given permission by ourselves”. As we fight against the negative images in our community and as a larger inclusion of these types of organizations (perhaps) are put into our community.

Growing up, music was a huge part of Hopkins church life. When he was a child, he saw a movie presentation of Madame Butterfly. While growing up in a Baptist church, he saw many different types of music, including classical.

Savior Faire: As a predominately African American company representing opera and classical music, how have you been received and how successful have you been.

Hopkins: *We have found a very special niche. We have several concerts throughout the season and will be doing different tours. People enjoy seeing us. We are currently doing a remake of Queenie Pie- Duke Ellington’s only opera about Madame C.J. Walker.*



*The Harlem Opera Theater’s Production of “Queenie Pie”.*

Savoir Faire: What do you think needs to be done about their being more exposure of things like classical music and dance in the African American community?

Hopkins: *I would like to see more happening here. I think there should be opera for beginners in every school in New York. This is so key in our community because arts are usually the first things to be cut. We don’t have music programs anymore. Our responsibility is very serious. They (the black youth) won’t know anything except for what is on the radio (if we don’t).*

The Harlem Opera Theatre is currently on tour, and will soon be doing a fundraiser event for the people in Haiti.

## **THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT/ ERA-**

With revolution came change, and just like the black art scene of the Harlem Renaissance came to a collective peak, so too did the black art scene of the Civil Rights Movement. If black artists of the Harlem Renaissance were here to say, 'We are black and we are now here', then black artists of the Civil Rights Movement were here to say, 'We are black, we are here, and we demand change!'

### **VISUAL ARTS:**

The first examples of this change can be found in the visual arts community for African Americans. Minnie Evans and James Hampton were two African American visual artists who both originated from the South. Both artists were known for reintroducing folk elements into the art world, but more importantly, for adding a stronger, bolder more spiritual dimension to black visual culture at the time, with their paintings. Other artists like Bob Thompson and Romare Bearden gave the possibility for a new set of options in African American visual culture. The collaged images of Afro America that Bearden introduced to the public a progressive view of black art and art making. Thompson incorporated a fusion of European painting styles and old remnants from the jazz culture.

Black visual artists seemed to be bridging the gap between a visual past and a visual future, with their artwork. An example of this type of artistic expression can be found in the work of California artist Betya Saar. Born on July 30, 1926, Saar was more of an assemblage artist than a painter. Her education included a degree in design from the University of California and a graduate degree in print making and education at the Pasadena City College, California State University in Long Beach. Her style of artwork consisted of arranging different objects either from advertisements or on the streets and putting them together in a box or a framed window. Most of the items that were used in her art work were items reflective of her own cultural heritage African American, Native American, Irish and Creole. Her interest in assemblage was inspired by the building of a Watts tower built in her California neighborhood as a child.

Saar created many pieces of artwork for which she would receive recognition, but the work for which she would be especially known was a collection known as the 'Aunt Jemima collection'. In the mid- late 60's, Saar began to collect certain images of stereotyped African American figures from many different sources of cultural references like advertising. Along with the image of Aunt Jemima, some of the images were of Uncle Tom, Little Black Sambo and others.





*Betya Saar's The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972.*

She put these images together in collages. These collages were used to make powerful social and political statements against these images and their place in society.

During the 1970's, Saar's artistic viewpoint would shift, putting most of her focus on tribal items from Africa and African folk traditions. She used bones to assemblage these pieces, Saar made another shift soon after this when a family member died. She changed to collecting, in boxes, family memorabilia of her aunt and other family members.

Saar's career, which expanded all the way into the 1990's, ended with a bang when she created her most controversial piece entitled The Liberation of Aunt Jemima. The Liberation of Aunt Jemima is a framed portrait of a mammy doll which carries a broom in one hand and a shot gun in the other, placed in front of Aunt Jemima syrup labels, shattering the images of the old African American mammy figure of the past.

We've discussed prior that the stereotypical images of African Americans given by whites goes back a long time. For these images, Saar can be counted as the most credited African American artist that spoke against these issues. Saar still resides in Los Angeles, California, and has two artist daughters, Alison Saar and Lezley Saar.

### MUSIC:

Everything was changing in more aggressive strides at this time. Dance moves like the Hustle and the Monkey were all the rage in dance clubs, black or white, all over America. African American music had gone from the blues, to jazz, to gospel, to R&B and rock and roll and then soul. The era of Motown and their musical roster of musicians were at its peak and gospel musicians like Aretha Franklin, Al Green and Sam Cooke were making their mark in secular music. More important than the types of music being created were the messages put forth in the music. Marvin Gaye asked "What's Going

On?”, and James Brown proclaimed “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”. With songs such as this and other things happening around the social African American movement, blacks were now able to feel a collective sense of pride in being black. They let their afros grow out and they participated in active protests for change and equality throughout the country.

### THEATRE:

With the success of not just the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, but the Sexual Revolution coming to a head, the theatre community for blacks was also taking a bolder, more provocative turn.

One of the most popular theatre productions during this time was a play by the name of Purlie.



*The play: Purlie, 1961.*

Purlie, originally named Purlie Victorious debuted in 1961 with Alan Alda, Rudy Dee, Beah Richards and Godfrey Cambridge. The story of Purlie was set in the American Jim Crow South. Purlie is Purlie Victorious Judson, a fire breathing Baptist preacher who returns to his home town of Georgia in hopes of saving the local community church and freeing the black cotton pickers who work on a near by plantation. Although slavery days are over, Ol’ Captain Cothpee’s, the owner of the plantation, is a cruel tyrant who works the black sharecroppers under unfair conditions. Other characters are introduced in the play, but it is Purlie that makes the greatest impact.

Many productions of Purlie were created since the 1961 debut, but it was not until 1970 that Purlie found its way to Broadway. From Broadway it found its way to the Winter Garden and the cast was revised to a cast which included singer Melba Moore Sherman Hemsley and Linda Hopkins. It ran for 688 performances.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s lead to a rush of African American theatre productions. Although mostly off Broadway, these plays and musicals were written, produced, choreographed and acted by all African American theatre professionals. This was a change from the African American theatre productions of the 1800’s and early 1900’s that were mostly Caucasian expressions of black culture. The productions of the 1960’s were different. Protest plays and musicals were now the

popular norm in black theatrical expression. Productions like The Slave by Leroi James and Imani Amuru Barakey, The Toilet (1965) and The Taming of Miss Jamie by Ed Bullins' and The Pitchman (1964) were all plays that made huge social statements about and against society. Ed Bullins' The Taming of Miss Jamie, included direct physical assaults of whites onstage and The Dutchinson was about a white woman who seduced and the murdered a middle-class black man on a subway. It was also at this time when the (NEC) Negro Ensemble Company was formed. The NEC was a foundation created sponsor plays that were written by blacks. The NEC became known for having the most African American productions of the time. Many of the productions continued on to Broadway.

### LITERATURE:

The Civil Rights/ Black Power Movement Era also saw the rise of black female poets. Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez were among the most popular. Playwright Lorraine Hansberry came to national attention with her play "A Raisin in the Sun". The play focused on a poor black family from Chicago struggling with the issues of race and finances while trying to keep their prideful family roots in tact. Another playwright to gain notoriety was Amiri Baraka, formally known as Leroi Jones, was known for his controversial off Broadway plays. He later on became known for his poetry.

Poet James Emanuel took a major step toward defining African American literature when he edited "Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America". It was the first collection of black writings released by a major publisher. Another influential African American anthology of the time was "Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro- American writing", edited by Leroi Jones and "The Negro Woman", edited by Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee in 1969.

Perhaps the most recognized literary work for this time was Alex Haley's Roots. Roots: The Saga of an American Family was the first African American book at the time to top the best sellers list. The book was a history of Haley's family in America. The book begins with the kidnapping of Haley's ancestor, Kunta Kinte, in the Gambia of Africa and goes all the way down to Haley's own story of how he became a writer. Roots began as a book and was eventually turned into a televised mini-series and won a Pulitzer Prize award. Before Roots, Haley was most known for his autobiography of Malcolm X, which was entitled The Autobiography of Malcolm X and published in 1965.

Although it may be considered as a form of music, as opposed to literature, the Civil Rights/ Black Power Movements experienced a cultural awakening when the poem "The Revolution Will Not be Televised", by the Last Poets was heard. The poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" set the tone for many forms of literary expression for future years in the African American community. This poem, set to music, by the Last Poets is considered by many to be the first actual recording of what we today refer to as rap. It stood out as such a relevant piece of art not only because of the whole genre of music that it possibly started, but, more importantly, because it spoke to the social and

political unrest that African American youth was feeling at the time. They say that revolution starts with the youth and every generation seemed to handle racism in its own way. Having seen what their parents went through in the civil rights era, the new generation of the Black Power Movement seemed no longer interested in 'turning the other cheek'.

Things such as rap/hip hop, and a resurgence of jazz were created by the form of literary expression started by "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised". Another phenomenon that was arguably created by this movement is a culture of underground poetry clubs and poets. Poetry has long been a very popular form of expression about things in society for African Americans. A phenomenon of underground poets and poetry clubs, have been around for about the past 10-15 years.

We spoke to Elson Edward John, Jr., a poet for the last 15 years, about his experiences being an African American poet and artist today.

Savoir Faire: What type of things/ topics do you like to write about in your poetry?

EE John: *Children who've met with misfortune or tragedy; relationships that both men and women go through, from a man's point of view, not a male's point of view. A male is general, a man is a person who understands. First and foremost, all my poems, I thank God for putting it in my heart to do it. Poems about slavery, erotic poems (without being too profound).*

Savoir Faire: Were you always into poetry?

EE John: *No. I hated English.*

Savior Faire: How long have you been writing poetry?

EE John: *15 years. I started writing poetry when I meet a woman who was pregnant and smoking crack. My first poem was entitled, "Little Baby". I continued writing for babies that had met their demise for any reason. I wanted to be their voice.*

Savoir Faire: Was there anything else that made you want to start writing poetry?

EE John: *My romance poems are done because too many men are not sensitive. There are not too many sensitive men out there. I wanted to show more of the man that you don't really see out there too much.*

Savoir Faire: What other forms of writing have you delved into? I understand you also began to write a novel.

EE John: *Maybe. It's a strong possibility. I'm working on a novel called Morbid Affection. It's a murder mystery. It's about a woman who was abused by her husband and*

*got tired of it and decided to kill him. After she killed him, she made love to his corpse. The story is about the mother-in-law's revenge for this matter. She wants to kill everyone in her path [because of this].*

Savoir Faire: What other things have you read or listened to that you would say give you further inspiration for writing your poetry?

EE John: *None. I have my own point of view, but music helps.*

Savoir Faire: What other writers do you respect or listen to?

EE John: *Gill Scott. He wrote about black revolutionary poems. Different cultures inspire me, people's attitudes, how they perceive themselves. Women [inspire me]. But women who are not trying to immolate that little bit of white that you want to be but can't be. Get to know you first.*

Savoir Faire: Who would you say is your audience when writing? Who do you imagine yourself talking to?

EE John: *All genders, women, men, and children.*

*For women: Romantic poems.*

*For men: Slave poems.*

*For children: Poems that depict their demise.*

Savoir Faire: As an African American poet, do you feel a certain responsibility to tell certain stories in a certain way?

EE John: *Being that I take facts and put them on paper in a certain way- no. If you can't take it, then don't read it.*

Savoir Faire: Do you feel that other African American artists should have a responsibility to tell certain stories in certain ways?

EE John: *Absolutely, because the way that they are depicting black women and men is deplorable. Tell the truth- but also give a story about a black man and woman where they are not a whore, a pimp or a hustler. If you tell me that that is reality, then how much of your history do you really know. If you remember our history and what we've been through, I don't think you would glorify it so much. [There's] more to life than sex. It's a beautiful thing, but after that, what else.*

*There is a problem for African American artists. Don't just say you have respect for yourself, act like you have respect for yourself. Don't contradict yourself. Respect yourself! When you have respect for yourself, you have respect for your race and everything else.*

## **THE STATE OF BLACK ART TODAY-**

The contemporary artists of today have got it a little easier than their predecessors. A stream of black artists such as Glenn Ligon, Kara Walker, Carrie Mea Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Stan Douglas, Steve McQueens, Isaac Julian, Yinka Shonibare and Lorna Simpson, have really been able to make impressive marks on the visual arts scene within the last 10-20 years. There has been a “greater level of visibility” for black artists according to Glenn Ligon. This could be for many reasons. According to Kinshaha Holman, the deputy director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, “The system that conveys art has changed” and Ligon says, “The sheer number of black artists being turned out by art schools has helped normalize their presence on the wider scene.”

Therefore, if we’re looking for an answer to the question of “Have African American artists caught up to their white predecessors- especially when it comes to the harder genres such as visual arts.” Although it has been a long time coming, it seems as though the answer to this question can be a yes. African American artists have caught up to their Caucasian contemporaries. Compared to the situation today, there was barely a world stage for people like Romare Bearden to tread.

However, just as black artists of yesterday had to deal with being accepted, contemporary artists have another possible hurdle to overcome. Being accepted on the merits of being an artist, not just a black artist, is the struggle of today. Contemporary black artists are arguably the most relevant artist yet because they must struggle to make their mark as not just African American artists, but artists in general. Their success and notoriety comes from not being expected to explore ‘black’ issues because they are black, but explore artistic issues because they’re artists.

This has proven to create a possible double-edge sword for the African American artist. Many in the African American community say that black artists should continually be worried about displaying culturally representative art. Art that speaks to the state of whatever it is that blacks are going through at the time. The fact that some black artists don’t, even though it may mean wider acceptance, is a cop-out to some in the African American community.

No matter how successful blacks become in any field, the issue of what many refer to as “post- traumatic stress slavery syndrome” may prove to be a constant source of hindrance for African American professionals. Although no longer in shackles, the past issues of slavery, Jim Crow and racism have left a psychological impact on the African American, even today. This left, perhaps, psychological restrictions on black artists and black art viewers alike. Black artists feel an obligation to explore exclusively socially conscious art. Black viewers of black art are only interested in artists who talk about black issues otherwise you are a ‘sellout’. Because there is a continued feeling of being attacked, African Americans may always feel the need to be on the defensive, sometimes showcasing this defensive through their work. Artists and art viewers alike may have a feeling of never truly being accepted unless it is on these terms.

A prominent example of this is African American contemporary artist, Jean-Michel Baptiste. Baptiste came to prominence in the 1980's and although he received international notoriety, was heavily criticized for creating art that did not 'respond to his people'. Kara Walker's images of sex, violence and sexual volatility made her internationally famous by the age of 28, but she was still dogged in some parts of the African American community for making art that was seen as perpetrating the violent imagery of racism, and giving it an almost titillating edge. Director Spike Lee was met with a large amount of resistance when, in 2000, he made "Bamboozled", a satire that judged some of the stereotyping of the blackface minstrel shows- and was at the same time, read as promoting them.

When it comes to contemporary black art, many members of the African American community express doubts about its "authenticity and appropriateness". The larger art community may cherish the frisson of races, but when it comes to the African American community, they ask whether things like a Walker cut out makes "a good statement or a bad one", rather than asking if it's compelling art or not.

There has, however, been an admitted appeal for black artists who stick to culturally relevant topics in their work. Adrienne Childs, a curator at the University of Maryland speaks about a "certain avant garde white consumer" who since the 1920's has purchased many auction style paintings from black artists. He views the paintings as an "exotic and interesting" spectacle and different from the race free work that white artists produce.

The struggle now, according to Glenn Ligon who says that he is "happy that works by him and many of his peers are getting into major museum collections, but he wonders if black artists such as Walker, McQueen and himself will ever be moved out of the category of 'black art', and be recognized as regular artists.

"We're still the subject of articles about black artists," Ligon says. "That is the reality."

### **"Little Baby".**

poem by Elson Edward John, Jr.

Hi Mom. I'm your little baby.  
Sitting nice and snug,  
Being battered and abused by your first love.  
Though I'm not here yet to fight and survive,  
I'm trying real hard to stay alive.  
For the love that I have for you is strong and true.  
And Mom, I think I kinda look like you.

Let me describe me to you.

Maybe that will help you stop what you do.  
My little feet- short and seft- attached to your little baby.  
My little toes- my cute little toes- attached to your little baby.  
My short stubby legs- all soft and brand new- attached to your little baby.  
My ten tiny fingers which someday hope to hug you attached to your little baby.  
My face showing lots of love, attached to your little baby.  
My cute little eyes that glow.  
Soft, puffy cheeks and tiny little mouth, attached to your little baby.  
Yep, that's me, your little baby all snuggle and sweet, so tiny and warm inside of my first  
love where I belong.

So please, stop Mom!  
I'm begging and pleading,  
Cause your love is all that I am needing.  
But if no, then I understand.  
Be I a girl or a little man.  
I love you Momma, yes this is true.  
But I don't love the things that you put me through.  
So goodbye Momma- sorry but I've got to go.  
You see my father made me a bed on baby's row.  
So good morning, good night, good bye for the last time.

I love you, Momma!!!!